DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 189 553 CS 005 529

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TITLE A Model for Teaching Reading in the Middle School.
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 7p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (25th, St. Louis, MO, May 5-9, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basal Reading: Content Area Reading: *Curriculum Development: Elementary Secondary Education: Individualized Reading: *Middle Schools: *Models: *Program Design: *Program Development: *Reading Programs: Team Teaching

ABSTRACT

The faculty of a middle school has constructed a model of a reading program, using components of other programs at other grade levels. The elements of the model include basal reading, teaching reading in the content areas, and individualized reading. The strengths of these components depend on teachers' understanding of learning theory and adolescent development. The flexibility of block-of-time scheduling and interdisciplinary team teaching afford an opportunity for each team of teachers to determine strengths and needs of their students, to plan and implement the reading program, and to evaluate and modify their instruction. (Five aspects of scheduling and nine steps for program implementation are discussed.) (RL)

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A MODEL FOR TEACHING READING IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Teaching reading at the middle school level is one of the major issues puzzling middle school educators today. Reacting to nationally decreasing Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, lower scores on standardized tests such as the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills, and disappointing results on locally-designed proficiency tests, the community exerts pressure upon middle school administrators and teachers. In responding to this cry for improvement in the reading performance of young people, it is essential to recognize that the middle school organizational plan exhibits excellent potential for the development of a structured, school-wide reading program.

The model I will describe was developed at Woodlawn Middle School in Baltimore County, Maryland. In an inservice course, our faculty developed a three-part program which is to a great extent based on the developmental characteristics of the adolescent and the interdisciplinary team teaching model. The reading program is an integral part of the total curriculum.

First, let's review some of the factors that were considered in developing the model. There has been a decline in reading scores in our school and school system. Although this can be rationalized in a number of ways, we have the obligation to investigate this as an instructional responsibility of the whole school. Reading teachers need support and reinforcement of skills, as well as reading instruction by <u>all</u> content area teachers.

School systems are experiencing pressure from their communities, the superintendent, as well as their state departments of education to return to the "basics," including increasing the amount of time spent teaching reading in the secondary schools with the tangible goal of increasing test scores. Although these pressures are exerted, often there is a minimum of direction from the central office with

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regard to methodology and specific ideas on how to improve the teaching of reading in the various subject areas.

To formulate a response to these pressures, programs need to be designed to incorporate current knowledge of early adolescents and how they learn. It is also important to consider how to utilize best the middle school organization, whether it consists of interdisciplinary teams, school within a school, combination subject teams, or departmentalization.

Our faculty is experienced in designing new programs through inservice courses. Thus, a strong nucleus of the faculty can recognize the responsibility to develop a model which they will subsequently implement. A program created in this way can be individualized to the needs of the student body and the talents of the faculty.

Our search for a model for teaching reading to middle school youngsters began with a study of learning theory and the nature of early adolescent learners -- their intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral development. With this study as a prerequisite, we then moved into an exploration of the three separate models: basal reading, reading through the content areas, and individualized reading.

We learned about typical elementary level basal programs, as well as series which include readers for seventh and eighth graders. We then investigated teaching reading in the content areas, the model generally claimed to be in effect at the secondary school level. Each teacher attempts to capture every opportunity available to teach vocabulary and foster application of word attack and comprehension skills when opportunities present themselves in that particular subject area. All teachers of the school should share in this responsibility.

Individualized reading programs may be those purchased from publishers, a set of materials designed by the teacher to allow students to work at their own rates, or a special program developed by a team of teachers. There is a great need for teachers to motivate, supervise, and evaluate the progress made by individual students in this approach.

We looked at the strengths and weaknesses of each of these models in isolation and from this we put together a composite which features the strengths of each option. In grade six, we have a basal reading program taught for fifty minutes a day by former elementary teachers as well as secondary teachers. Each teacher in the sixth grade team is a subject area specialist but also teaches at least two basal reading groups during the reading period.

Additionally, we are able to make available two reading teachers to work with the remedial readers. We feel that we have more precise grouping in this approach than could be achieved in the typical self-contained sixth grade classroom. Last year only one-third of our sixth graders entered Woodlawn Middle School reading on or above grade level, so we are especially proud of the fact that the average sixth grader gained almost one and a half years of reading growth between September and May. We see great potential for basal reading for some students in grades seven and eight, but many secondary trained teachers feel they are not trained sufficiently to teach basal reading and are reluctant to assume the additional lesson preparations.

Several other roadblocks to the basal approach are the need to find materials appropriate to the interest levels of seventh and eighth graders and the difficulty of finding time to teach reading as a separate subject when central office supervisors seek more time for foreign language, industrial arts, and home economics instruction in the seventh and eighth grades. Finally, additional reading resource staff would be required to assist teachers and to teach daily remedial groups.

We do feel that despite these reservations about basal reading, teachers have changed their attitudes from feeling that any reading skills should be taught only by English and reading teachers to the assuming of responsibility for teaching reading skills appropriate to content.

The potential for teaching reading through the content areas is perhaps even greater than we realize at this time. In Baltimore County, we have devoted a great deal of time and money to developing curriculum guides for each subject at each

grade level. In the future, these curriculum guides will need to show what reading skills can be taught in conjunction with specific content materials.

There is a need, though, for a hierarchy of skill development from grade to grade or perhaps on a non-graded basis. This potential can be achieved when all teachers become trained as reading teachers in the certification or re-certification process. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the extra time needed to prepare lessons integrating skills and content if the curriculum is not reading skill oriented. There is the danger that the content will become secondary to the reading skills.

The third phase of the model is individualized reading. The flexibility in grouping and scheduling in interdisciplinary teaming are instrumental to successful individualized programs in the middle school. Teachers are free to vary the length of a class period or to regroup students temporarily or permanently without administrative red tape. Individualization occurs at Woodlawn Middle in the skill development aspect of our learning lab/special interest exploratories, in work with students who did not pass the seventh grade Maryland Functional Reading Test, and in content and skill-oriented learning stations and centers. In our remedial reading program, the instruction is primarily individual, through a diagnostic/ prescriptive approach.

There is definitely greater potential for the individualized aspects of the model for both a deficient as well as a very capable reader. Numerous opportunities exist for interdisciplinary teams to regroup students according to student needs, interests, and abilities on a team-wide basis.

Perhaps the pitfalls in this area are the greatest. There is the danger of the classroom becoming unstructured and teachers losing the kind of control we know is necessary to work effectively with young people today. Also, an enormous amount of time is needed to organize, implement, and evaluate individualized reading programs.

To make this three part program possible, there are five aspects of scheduling which must be considered.

(1) Block-of-time scheduling in which the English, social studies, science, and mathematics teachers teach simultaneously is essential to the success of the interdisciplinary team.

(2) The blocks of time provide the freedom to design flexible schedules in which the large time blocks may be divided on a modular basis. The teachers are free to make scheduling decisions based on their judgments of instructional program or student needs.

(3) Planning periods sufficient for coordinating the middle school program and facilitating the reading program must be scheduled.

(4) Individual interdisciplinary teaching teams must be provided the flexibility to determine team priorities and to exercise local options based on assessed student needs.

(5) To resource the reading program, reading specialists should be available as consultants. If the team provides regular group instruction in reading, the reading specialist should be scheduled to teach remedial groups.

After these five factors in scheduling are considered, there are nine steps in implementation of the model. They are not in sequential order but must occur at various stages of the implementation process, often simultaneously.

(1) The decision to provide a formal reading program in the middle school must reflect a total faculty commitment with teachers understanding clearly the extent of their individual involvement in reading teaching and the role they play as an integral part of the total reading program.

(2) To feel capable of assuming a greater responsibility to teach reading, teachers need training through pre-service, inservice, or graduate reading courses.

(3) As individual subject area specialists, members of interdisciplinary teams, and as part of a total middle school program, teachers must acknowledge the potential of this model for teaching reading.

(4) Program success is dependent upon availability of appropriate commercial materials as well as teacher-made materials. Time and resources for development of teacher-made materials must be provided.

(5) The expertise and leadership of central office administration, curriculum specialists, reading supervisors, and subject area supervisors are indispensable.

(6) At the local school level, administration of an assessment vehicle will establish the reading needs of the students. Through local school workshops, the program can then be planned, implemented, and evaluated.

(7) To reinforce the middle school's efforts, parental support and cooperation must be sought.

(8) Within each grade and from grade to grade, reading skills must be coordinated through establishment and systematic evaluation of clearly stated priorities and goals.

(9) As interdisciplinary teams and disciplinary departments, teachers need time to plan and coordinate reading instruction.

In the past, the assumption was made that by the time students leave elementary school their need for formal reading instruction has been fulfilled. The large numbers of students who enter middle schools reading below grade level compel individual teachers, reading teachers, and administrators to work together to design a total school reading program. In the middle school, knowledge of adolescent growth and development, as well as learning theory, should form the basis of a reading program which combines the strengths of the three components -- the formal reading program, teaching reading through content areas, and individualized programs. The flexibility of block-of-time scheduling and interdisciplinary teaming afford an important opportunity for each team of teachers to determine strengths and needs of their students, to plan and implement the reading program, and to evaluate and modify their instruction.